DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 359 489 CS 011 344

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TITLE Whole Language Teacher Education in Multicultural Contexts: Living Our Own Models of Learning.
PUB DATE Dec 91
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (41st, Palm Springs, CA, December 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; Elementary School Teachers; *Experiential Learning; Higher Education; Inservice Teacher Education; Multicultural Education; Reading Research; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Response; *Whole Language Approach
IDENTIFIERS Experienced Teachers; New Teachers

ABSTRACT

A study examined the reactions and responses of new and veteran teachers throughout a full semester graduate in-service course which introduced whole language theory through experiential learning. The 30 K-8 teachers in the course came from 7 schools of a large inner-city school district where 70% of the students lived below the poverty level. Two-thirds of the teachers were African-American or Hispanic. The class environment revolved around variability, variety, choice, flexibility, and multicultural awareness. Data included teacher learning logs, an "examination" which solicited what teachers understood and liked or did not understand or like about whole language, application projects, and classroom visits after the course ended. The teachers came to trust the class, each other, and themselves as they experienced a range of writing tasks and shared their difficulties in analyzing the journal articles which they read. They expressed an excitement about learning, sharing, and grappling with issues and they underwent a series of reactions to interactive and cooperative learning methods. All attempted some whole language activities with their classes and reflected upon the strengths and weaknesses of whole language. Findings suggest the need for more: avenues of professional collaboration for teachers to discuss professional issues; integrated and interactive activities for teachers to learn through experience and with one another; and opportunities for teachers to engage in spiral learning in conjunction with practice. (RS)

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WHOLE LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION IN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXTS: LIVING OUR OWN MODELS OF LEARNING

Presented at National Reading Conference Roundtable

Palm Springs, California December, 1991

Whole Language Teacher Education in Multicultural Contexts: Living Our Own Models of Learning

Objectives

This study explored an approach to teacher education in which university-level instruction and methodology was designed to reflect the theories and philosophy behind the content teachers were learning. More specifically, we examined teacher reactions and responses throughout a full semester graduate in-service course which introduced whole language theory through experiential learning to new and veteran teachers, all of whom had been taught and were teaching along very traditional lines.

Acknowledging the importance of their multicultural backgrounds and previous teaching experience, we were particularly interested in the various "meanings" teachers made of whole language as expressed in their explanations and interpretations, reactions to readings and class activities, and decisions regarding applications in their own classrooms.

From the first meeting, we intended that teachers would participate in the course design through choice of activities, textbooks, and assignments. The guiding principles included the issue of inclusion/exclusion - especially in language, validity of past experience, learner choice and interactive problem-solving. The focus of the course entailed learning by doing, providing for individual interpretation and group interaction through ownership in a supportive environment of learning.

Theoretical Framework

This study drew upon a variety of theories and areas of research, including concepts of whole language (Froese, 1991; Goodman, 1986), schema theory (Schallert, 1982), cooperative learning (Johnson et al., 1984), teacher empowerment (Lieberman, 1988), teacher reflectivity (Schon, 1983), and multicultural education (Ramsey, 1987; Ramsey et al., 1989). All of these perspectives, directly or indirectly, de-emphasize more traditional views of education in which those who know transmit specific knowledge to those who do not know. Instead, these theories espouse alternative models of learning that a) acknowledge and build upon students' experiences and backgrounds; b) give students choice and encourage self-directed learning; c) provide for a supportive, low-risk environment in which students can experiment without fear of failure; and d) stress the importance of student interaction and cooperative learning.

As noted by Short and Burke (1989), many university and college teachers continue to follow the more traditional approaches even when the course content concerns alternative models of learning. We believe we need to practice these newer models of learning in our own teaching for two reasons. First, in the case of whole language, it provides a better match between what we say and what we do, thereby becoming a major lesson in and of itself. Experiencing the processes and feelings that students will undergo is a critical instructional dimension, particularly for teachers who have practiced traditional ways.

Second, increased levels of participation and involvement are likely to improve learning, regardless of course content.

Multicultural contexts formed the backdrop to this study because of the characteristics of the teachers, their students, and the course content - all of which lent themselves to heightened awareness of the import of recognizing and providing for cultural diversity. Issues involved with race, discrimination, and variations in language and literacy experiences could not be ignored for they could affect teachers' and students' attitudes toward teaching and learning.

Participants

The thirty teachers in this study came from seven different schools of a large inner-city school district where 70% of the students live below the poverty level. Twenty teachers taught primary grades (K-3); ten taught intermediate grades (4-8). Two-thirds of the teachers were Hispanic or African-American.

We, the authors of this paper, planned and taught the course as a team. Our collaboration and interaction was extensive and turned out to be a rich learning experience for us both, in part because our own backgrounds were different but complementary. One of us had extensive whole language experience teaching students and supervising teachers at the secondary level. The other, while sympathetic to many aspects of whole language, held more of an information processing point of view and had worked many years with culturally different students at the elementary

level. Our discussions heightened our own sense of the importance of background on philosophy - an insight often shared with the teachers during class sessions.

The Course

The class environment purposely revolved around variability, variety, choice, flexibility, and multicultural awareness and sensitivity.

A low-risk environment of learning needed to be established. We encouraged innovation and experimentation by explaining our objectives in line with whole language philosophy. We emphasized the value of learning from mistakes and acknowledged the richness of the range of purposes, backgrounds, insights, and concerns of all those enrolled in the course.

Added to this variability was the variety of resources which included books, articles, artifacts, overhead transparencies, a video, a guest speaker, and oral and written interaction and feedback based upon the myriad past and joint experiences of teachers, students, university professor, and graduate student. The shared sense of learning from one another underscored the climate of trust.

Instead of requiring a textbook, we chose a variety of readings, some theoretical and some more practical. Halfway through the course, we allotted class time for book assessments and encouraged each teacher to choose a "resource book" from a large selection that ranged from Atwell's (1987) In The Middle to

Butler and Turbill's (1984) Towards a Reading - Writing Classroom. We stressed the need for each teacher to select a text most meaningful for that teacher's school context and population.

Course topics included the processes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (and their integration), cooperative learning, and content issues such as thematic units and integrating subject areas. Various topics were revisited, in a spiral nature, exploring them at increasingly deeper levels, often at the teachers' request.

Planning was meticulous. The framework for the syllabus encompassed long-range planning as well as class sessions that addressed processes and content, but allowed for flexibility in implementation. Assignments and readings followed instructors' discussions during planning sessions that took into account implicit and voiced, ongoing teacher concerns. We offered a number of activities for each session as options to the class, while insuring adequate coverage for the range of issues we felt were pertinent to whole language philosophy.

Thus, tentative and alternative plans were negotiated with teachers through a positive and constructive exchange of felt and perceived needs. As a result, though varied in time allocation and placement, each session divided into small group interaction, whole class discussions, and lecture with class participation.

In keeping with whole language philosophy, teachers explored ideas and possibilities for application based upon their own

experiences and strengths. The meanings and interpretations each teacher gained from readings, discussions, activities, and experimentation helped shape the joint decisions and individual growth. Teachers weighed the possibilities of whole language without any pressure to implement any specific strategies or techniques.

We made extensive use of learning logs in which teachers wrote their reactions to the readings, in-class activities, and applications in their own classrooms. We responded to these on a weekly basis. We refrained from providing specific definitions of terms to enable teachers to formulate their own understandings inductively. We did guide them in differentiating between traditional and alternative thinking and applications.

Evaluation criteria consisted of learning log substance (not quantity), class participation, reaction papers, responses to an open-ended "examination" (part of which was answered in groups of three), and an "application" curricular project of their own choosing (shared in a mini-conference format).

What We Analyzed

We studied the meanings teachers made of the course by analyzing three sources of information: a) the learning logs; b) the "examination" which solicited what teachers understood and liked or did not understand or like about whole language; and c) the application projects.

With the help of a research assistant, we carefully examined

teachers' reactions and interpretations in terms of the content itself, the teachers' backgrounds and interests, the university classroom contexts, and the teachers' classroom contexts. All material was separately read by at least two people who then discussed emerging patterns and themes both for individual teachers and across the entire group.

In addition, by invitation, we visited four teachers' classrooms, after the course ended, to observe the extent to which they had implemented changes toward a whole language classroom.

Results

Findings showed changes in the areas of trust, affect, and content. The social and psychological climate of acceptance enabled teachers to shift their focus from their initial, personal insecurities about learning and about themselves as writers and readers. They came to trust the class, each other, and themselves as they experienced a range of writing tasks, frequently and regularly, in class and at home, and shared their difficulties in analyzing the journal articles which they read.

Several important themes emerged. Teachers expressed an excitement about learning, sharing, and grappling with issues in the low-risk environment we had steadily created. Many had noted how their past educational experiences had proved intimidating and had caused them to question their abilities as learners. Actually experiencing this difference made them more intent upon

providing the same supportive climate for their own students.

In terms of affect, the teachers noted the change they underwent when involvement and meaningfulness increased. They looked forward to coming to class to participate and comment. They gained metacognitive awarenesses which facilitated greater expression of ideas and raised the level of discourse.

The content dimension forced the teachers to determine the choice of project which held the most meaning for each. As they strengthened their knowledge bases of content and processes, they evidenced different understandings and relationships in their applications.

Teachers underwent a series of reactions to interactive and cooperative learning methods. They initially experienced an uncertainty due to the unfamiliarity of cooperative learning, gradually gained confidence in themselves and the extent to which they were learning, and eventually opted for designing joint learning activities for their students. Some teachers leapt through these stages, others weighed factors more deliberately. In the end, they had all attempted some whole language activities with their classes.

Teachers reiterated how rare, but rewarding they had found the opportunity to discuss instructional matters with colleagues. We were struck repeatedly by the critical role played by the teachers' background experiences and teaching contexts - both in their reactions to course content and method and in their

decisions about what they wanted to learn more about to implement in their classes.

At intervals throughout the course, we requested the teachers try to define whole language. In the process, they expressed increasing awareness that no one facile definition existed, that whole language balanced skills and creativity, and that their understandings evolved as they continued to adapt their classrooms to their students' needs and pursuits. They appreciated the independence fostered, the increased active learning, and the changes in student and teacher classroom roles.

One particular reading evoked strong response and became a class example of a whole language event. Teachers reacted strenuously to Delpit's (1988) article concerning minorities and the "power code." So involved in these issues, teachers had begun discussing them at their home schools prior to class, requested we begin class with discussing that article (one of four for that week), and proceeded to talk and write about these concerns for the remainder of the course. Strong feelings, sharing, and self-revelations evidenced the importance of race, social class, and multiculturalism in the teaching/learning process in general, and especially for these teachers in their teaching situations.

Teachers reflected upon whole language - its strengths, shortcomings, and unknowns. Learning log entries revealed growing awareness that whole language was student-centered, which bolstered student self-esteem, but did not negate the knowledge

of the teacher, who became a facilitator. Structure became increasingly important, as teachers realized the nature of planning which developed progressively, but more authentically in tune with students' needs and concerns. Teachers identified the shifts of the teacher's role from correction to more careful eliciting of student interpretation. Overall, teachers expressed an appreciation for the way whole language promoted independence and positive attitudes toward learning.

Other strengths of whole language, as indicated in the examination responses, included integration of topics, relevance of material to students' lives, developing social skills, and the empowerment of students when they participate in the entire teaching-learning process. The more students became explicitly aware of the purposes and means for achieving goals, the more teachers found student curiosity and confidence increased. Teachers felt that the open-ended way of teaching proved more thought-provoking and resulted in the use of language in more meaningful ways.

Teachers also voiced clear concerns about whole language. They focused mainly upon the students, the setting, and the field. Would students be sufficiently prepared for standardized tests? Would students gain an adequate grasp of grammar? How would the student adjust to a more traditional teacher the following year? Would schools provide sufficient funds for resources? Would administration provide training, support, and guidance? Would conventional colleagues protest and obstruct any

attempt toward change? Would research pursue the goals and success rate of whole language classrooms?

Other concerns dealt more directly with their role. When and how do they teach important skills? How much control should be relinquished? How can they monitor all students effectively? How can they provide sufficient evaluation measures? How do they answer the doubts of administrators, supervisors, and parents? How do they best utilize time to cover content and meet learning styles?

Teachers wanted to know more about developing ways to communicate with other constituencies - parents, colleagues, administrators -- to inform and to enlist their help. The more they experimented, the more questions they devised. They sought answers to curricular and affective snags; they requested more training in cooperative learning and classroom management.

Many teachers used these questions as springboards for the projects they designed. These projects became culminations for the course, but commencements for their own action research. Many teachers created thematic units for two to four weeks duration, usually envisioning whole language across the curriculum. Some teachers focused on one case study - of a student, or assessment measures, or grade level curriculum development. All incorporated integration of disciplines and some degree of cooperative learning.

Some teachers began experimentation early in the course. They returned week after week with progress reports that sparked

animated discussions about what worked and what didn't, as teachers and students adjusted to new roles and expectations. Some developed these attempts into their final projects. Others held out longer, weighing more and more information before introducing any innovation in the classroom. Ironically, those most skeptical at first and most hesitant to change are the ones who invited us to their classrooms. They took pride in their efforts and sought additional feedback after the course had ended.

Implications

The main implications of this study concern the need for more a) avenues of professional collaboration for teachers to discuss professional issues, b) integrated and interactive activities for teachers to learn through experience and with one another, and c) opportunities for teachers to engage in spiral learning in conjunction with practice.

Teachers felt the excitement of learning through sharing issues of importance to them. They experienced changes in attitude about teaching and learning in response to participating in an environment of choice. They targeted areas to revisit as they chose to write learning log entries and hold class discussions about the readings that either most moved or most confused them. Bridging theory and practice through thoughtful reflection enabled them to begin action research projects.

Treating teachers as we would hope they will treat their

students resulted in replacing intimidating routines with thought-provoking inquiry into the nature of teaching and learning.

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